WRITING

Writing 101: What Is Chekhov's Gun? Learn How to Use Chekhov's Gun In Your Writing

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Though it is regularly confused for a plot device, Chekhov's gun is in fact a tool for writers to understand the use of detail in effective plot

What Is Chekhov's Gun?

Chekhov's gun is a dramatic principle that suggests that details within a story or play will contribute to the overall narrative. This encourages writers to not make false promises in their narrative by including extemporaneous details that will not ultimately pay off by the last act, chapter, or conclusion. Chekhov's gun has become a highly influential theory of effective writing that mandates noticeable details are integrated into the plot trajectory, character development, and mood of the work.

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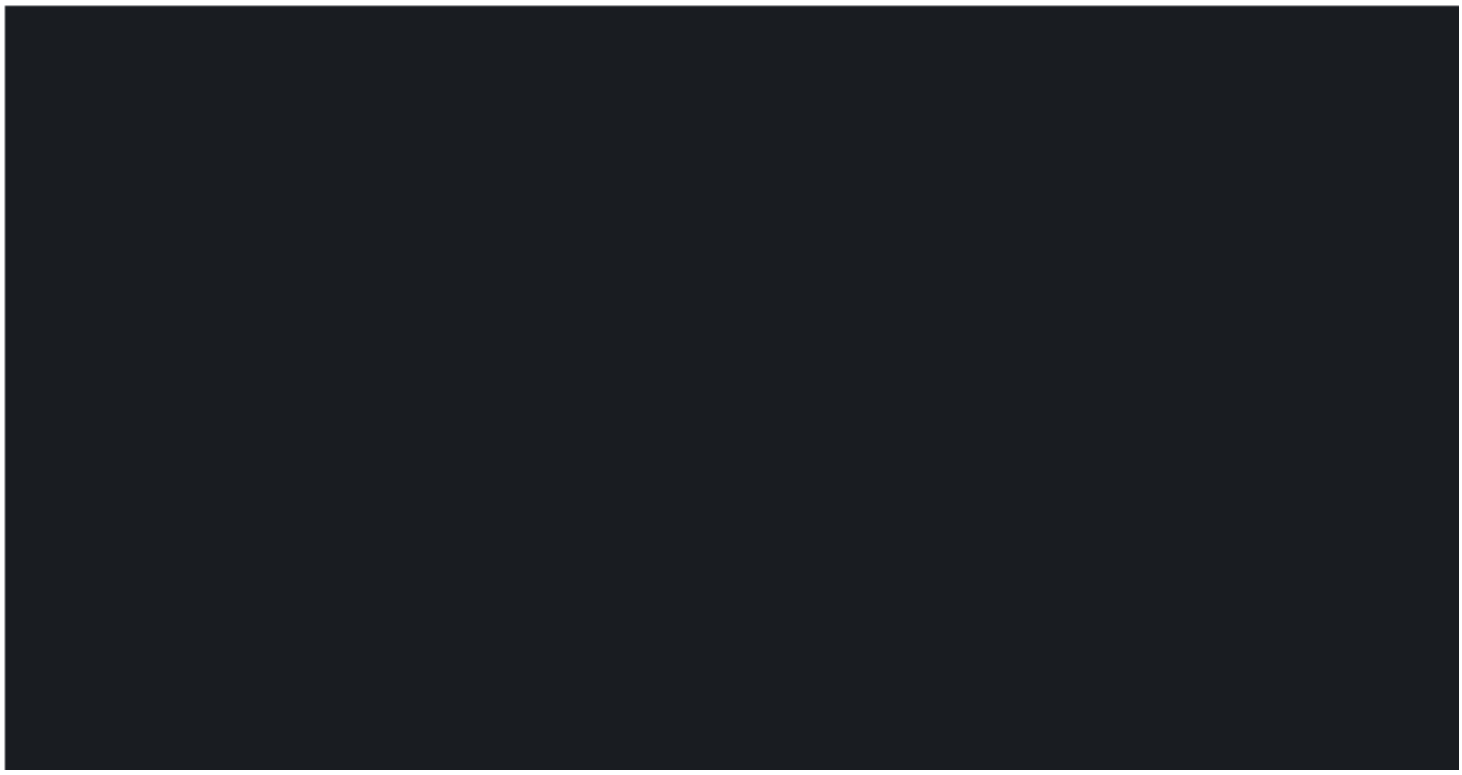

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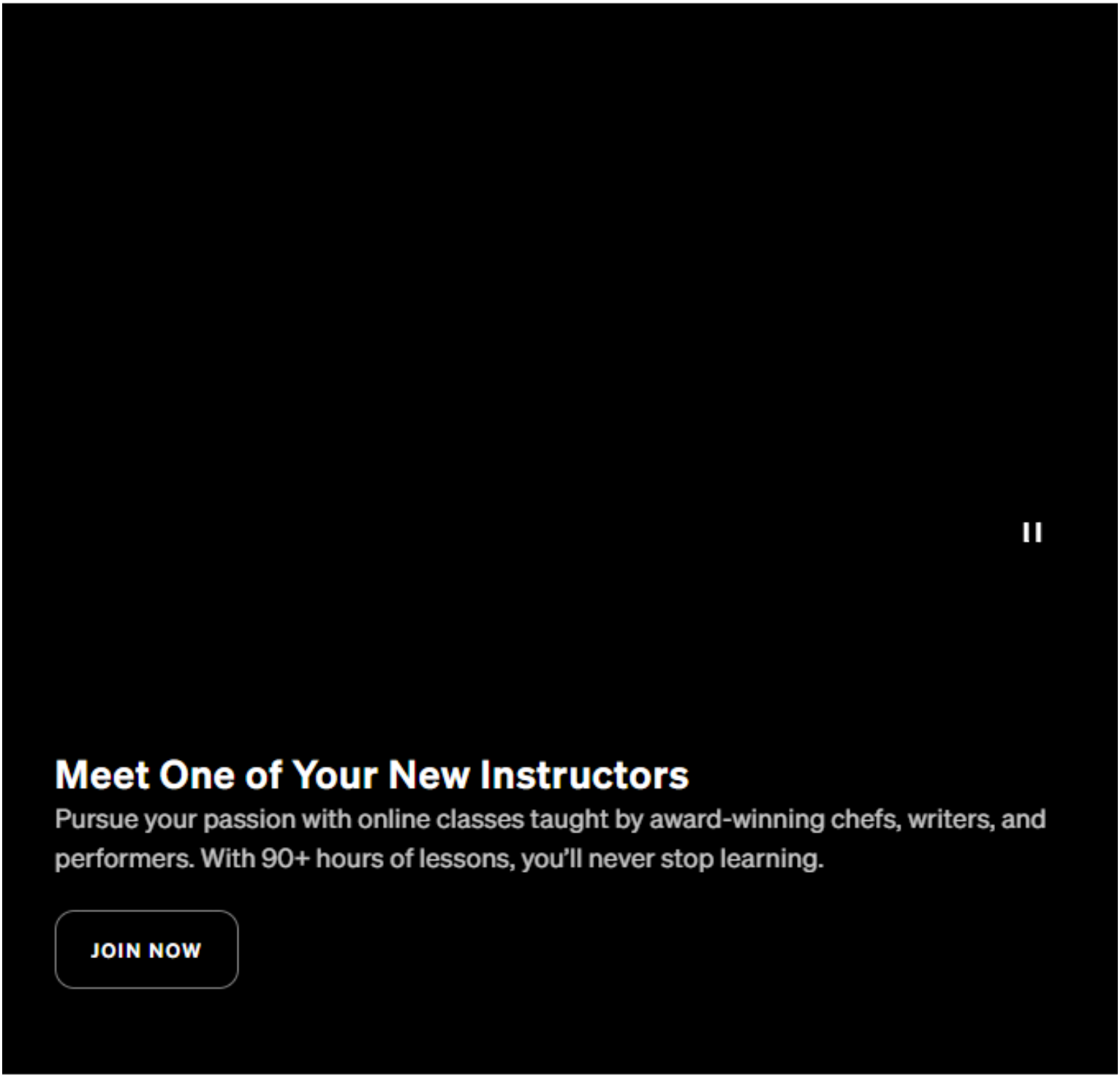
Who Was Anton Chekhov and How Was Chekhov's Gun Invented?

Anton Chekhov was a nineteenth-century writer of short stories and plays and one of the greatest authors and playwrights of the modern era. The author of *Uncle Vanya* and *The Seagull*, Chekhov has become a central figure in literary history and criticism.

- The term "Chekhov's gun" emerged from the ways Chekhov repeatedly characterized writing in letters to his contemporaries. The most famous version advises: "If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired. Otherwise don't put it there."

- Other versions include a loaded rifle instead of a pistol, but the underlying point remains the same: if something in your narrative grabs the reader's attention, that detail has narrative work to do and must be significant to the overall work. Otherwise, its significance is lost on the reader and authors are writing checks they can't cash, including tantalizing details and possibilities that will ultimately go unfulfilled.

- It is important to note that Chekhov's gun is a literary concept and dramatic principle, not a rhetorical device—it is not something authors deploy, but rather a guidepost they follow.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What Is the Significance of Chekhov's Gun In Writing?

While the principle of Chekhov's gun is straightforward, there is some

confusion around what actually constitutes Chekhov's gun. Other tools and analytics—like MacGuffins and red herrings—are related to or follow the rules of Chekhov's gun, but are not interchangeable with it.
This confusion is best resolved by considering what details a reader will likely notice in a story.

- Some details will be noticed regardless of context and the author doesn't need to draw attention to them to get the reader to notice. A gun or other weapon, a giant diamond ring, and a mysterious briefcase, for instance, will always be noticed, whereas others, like a fedora, will not. Noticeable details should always payoff in stories, regardless of how much emphasis the author gives them.

- An everyday vase will go unnoticed unless the author specifically draws them out with extended commentary and rhetoric. A floral vase on the table is easily overlooked but, if the author repeatedly draws attention to it, Chekhov's gun dictates that this vase had better be significant to the overall story—perhaps in addition to flowers, it holds the codes to the French nuclear arsenal.

- If an author doesn't draw attention to such details, however, they do not need to follow this rule. A traffic jam in LA is nothing noteworthy and noting it in the narrative does not mean it must follow Chekhov's gun and ultimately prove significant. If the author, however, prates and prattles about the traffic,then it falls into Chekhov's gun territory and must prove important.

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How Is Chekhov's Gun Used in Writing?

Chekhov's gun can suggest a story is tightly woven, with emphasized details ultimately helping to shape the narrative.

- Perhaps the best example of Chekhov's gun principle in action comes from examples of Chekhov and his work. In Act I of his play *The Seagull*, for example, the main character carries a rifle out onto the stage. By the end of the play, he has used the riffle to commit suicide. Such a detail—a rifle, in the main character's hand, on stage—would appear superfluous were it not to figure into the plot's development and would have violated Chekhov's own principle had it not been the instrument of the character's death.

- Successful literary tools and plot structures— like foreshadowing— can also be described by Chekhov's gun, which is a rule effective foreshadow follows. For example, readers of the *Harry Potter* series will remember being lightly peppered with details regarding a certain set of Vanishing Cabinets, first mentioned in the second book of the series, and then the fifth book, before becoming central to the plot of the sixth book. Here, foreshadowing adheres to Chekhov's gun by not leaving emphasized details (such as repeatedly lengthy descriptions of a cabinet) without any narrative significance by the story's conclusion.

- Though it is not a literary technique, Chekhov's gun can be a useful analytical tool for critics that can be used to describe narrative shortcomings. Saying that a particular work did not adhere to Chekhov's gun suggests the story was unfocused, concerned by insignificant details that did not figure into the larger work.

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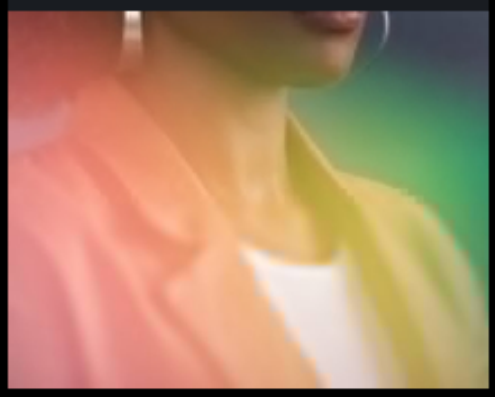

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4 Tips on How To Use Chekhov's Gun In Writing

Chekhov's gun can be deployed for

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various purposes to indicate several different things.

1. **Remember, Chekhov's gun is not a literary device**. It is a theory about the economy of detail within plotted narratives. It's not something you do as much as something you follow.

2. **To follow it, consider the details you include**. This means you need to think about whether they are fits of fancy or they actively contribute to the overall plot structure.

3. **Feel free to break the rules sometimes**. Red herrings, or details included to throw the reader off subsequent plot twists, are by design details that violate Chekhov's gun. Leaving readers to suspect the wrong person of the crime in the mystery by surrounding them with